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ABSTRACT

A centerpiece of the collaborative exchange characteristic of the writing center at Rollins College, Florida, is the inclusion of peer writing consultants, who present their strategies and debate their Center's policies at regional and national conferences. In the Fall of 1984, some faculty and students from Rollins went to the first National Peer Tutoring Conference at Brown University, even before a writing center had been developed. For the director of the Writing Center, the conferences she and her colleagues attended over the years have been integral to the training and professional growth of undergraduate peer writing consultants. This inclusiveness has prevented the stagnation often found in academe. The consultants have become professionals, convincing others of their possibilities. The effect of students and faculty interacting as equals and collaborators at conferences has been a transforming experience. (RS)

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A Complex Tapestry: Weaving What We Learn from Each Other into Our Centers

It was a splash of light over the confusion of the field as I then perceived it. The truth is, I was creating a Writing across the Curriculum Program. Interactive with it, secondary, was to be a Writing Center--and herein lay the surprise! What made it so was collaboration. . .a model for faculty and campus. Put simply, the students and I had to collaborate--I had to share it all! The return I did not expect: Writing Center community changed my life, decentered me in relationships as I had previously decentered the classroom, gave me the wholly unexpected gift of connectedness and complexity, then sent me off in search of the means to share serenity in the midst of procreant chaos.

Now every year I change the Writing Center. Not overnight, not without help from friends. . .clients writing there, tutors working there, faculty interacting with us and building the Center into assignments. And of course. . .not without the professional colleagues and organizations with whom I collaborate. Let me translate this to plain English--if I can! Shall I offer a metaphor? Tell a story? Let me intertwine the two.

In her novel Northshore, Sheri Tepper creates the metaphor of a child who walks the night, stomping in puddles which reflect the light, hoping to splash it out across the darkness. Going to professional conferences is like this--though it never quite felt that way until I started taking peer writing consultants. And splashing in puddles of light to spread some beams across a land of darkness is a sort of working metaphor for the whole process of collaboration our discipline is about here.

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It starts in the darkness where questions explode and possibilities are considered. Think of darkness fertile with potential, the chaos of ideas joyously colliding. Or to put it another way, we decide we need a Writing Center, and we bumble around a bit on the campus, trying to learn who needs what and whether funding will be forthcoming.

Here's where my story starts too. In the fall of 1984, just ten years ago, the first National Peer Tutoring Conference got underway at Brown University. I didn't know about it, but my soon-to-be colleagues at Rollins sent some faculty and students there. It was a puddle of light in the surrounding chaos of new beginnings. What was brought back from the Brown camaraderie was an understanding that a good Writing Center would require interaction with faculty, a training program, materials, and some computers. What awaited my arrival at Rollins, then, were two bookcases (with 6 books to start what has grown into our pedagogical library), a training course in the works ready for my catalogue description, 3 Sanyo computers (the precursors of our IBM pc's and our satellite computers in dorms), and a Writing across the Curriculum Program to develop in conjunction with the Writing Center. Of course I was grateful to those folks meeting to form a new organization. . .and already shaping my Center!

There <u>is</u> a footnote to this happy story. By the time I got us up and running it was October; suddenly I discovered the second National Peer Tutoring Conference was to be at Bucknell University in just two weeks. Getting the funding was the easy

part in those days. The trouble was finding the students. Hard though it may be to believe now, our elegant and professional Chair here was once a confused undergraduate, who finally agreed to do me the favor of going off to that conference. (I think that must have transformed Beth, as she put up no objection to coming to New Orleans this week!) Back to Florida from Pennsylvania our representatives brought a bagful of golden leaves, a collection of handout materials, and a burning desire that we should produce a brochure to define our services. (Your handouts include copies of the two brochures which evolved out of their enthusiasm.)

The following year Janet and Meg went to the same conference in Washington, DC, where they made a presentation and came back bursting with pride that people liked their new title. By then I'd come up with the dignified term "peer writing consultants," to acknowledge their intense training and professional status. (This term Tom MacLennan of UNC--Wilmington picked up from me at a conference of the Southeast Writing Center Association, and we've been enjoying its inevitable evolution ever since.) Janet also came back from the National Peer Tutoring Conference determined to define herself in non-teacherly terms, and she got the entire staff involved in contemplating their intermediary and facilitative role, separate from and for that reason of equal value to the very different work professors do. Soon we all understood the consultant's task much better, due entirely to Janet's having spoken up in Washington over her distaste for

something she'd heard. Eight years later, Carter succinctly underscored this value of conferences when she wrote, "Explaining the Writing Center to faculty and professionals outside of Rollins has helped me gain a clearer sense of our purpose."

Now multiply this effect. Consider how the National Peer Tutoring Conference (along with numerous regional meetings) and a number of Writing Centers seem to have grown up together, the participants collaborating on the exchange of information and ideas, reporting back each year on new experiments resulting from the previous year's meetings. Gradually this moveable feast of input and response has evolved from often lively debate over definitions to structures to tutoring strategies to political policies and proposals for extending Writing Center pedagogy beyond the walls of academe.

Now we all benefit from the camaraderie of these conferences, picking up references and job opportunities, new handouts and promised consultations to ease the concerns of administrators. Without fail the peer writing consultants I bring to conferences write of the heightened sense of community they develop, their commitment to the Center, their pleasure in coming to know a faculty member in a new context, their delight in hearing me interact with a host of professionals from other institutions. Many analyze their own ventures into hobnobbing, though sometimes I shudder at such tales as a couple of my students crawling under a bed in a hotel room in front of a respected Director of another Center in search of the quarter someone had lost earlier in

trying to make the vibrator work. (I confess my eternal gratitude to Ron Maxwell of Penn State for telling me later how much fun my students were rather than remarking upon the more bizarre aspects of their time together.)

Equally important are the sessions we attend, for as Jennifer wrote, "The Writing Center experience is more meaningful when I've been exposed to the professional world that conferences offer. Our Writing Center work needs to be put in a context, and going to the NCTE this past weekend did just that for me." I admit that some sessions seem themselves to be bathed in darkness, swarthy puddles reflecting very little. Yet even these give peer consultants pause for reflection and make them understand the power of their work. One Center, for example, modelled their "shout method" of consulting, standing over clients and screaming at their stupidity in making certain mistakes circled with a bright red marker. I think my consultants learned more of the value of supportive criticism from this session than from my training. Indeed, this negative model is still a humorous bit of our culture, even as those institutions with honor codes which only allow tutors to read "dead papers" (i.e., already graded) have led us to reflect on our purpose. And I still recall the National Peer Tutoring Conference in Saratoga Springs when a Director presented the case for refusing to read and respond to racist, sexist, or homophobic work. Afterwards she refused to let those with alternative opinions complete their sentences. Finally Sue, a Rollins consultant for all of a month, leaned

across the table and observed, "I'm going to keep talking even if you cut me off. You've just modelled for us how repugnant your proposal is. You want us to refuse to hear anyone who disagrees with us, just as you're doing right now. And that's just what it models for our clients. As consultants we'd be saying, 'Never listen to the other side.' Wouldn't it make more sense to read the paper and challenge the argument?"

Other sessions, though, seem to be swimming in the radiance of a spectrum we hadn't yet discovered. In Youngstown we learned from tutors at the University of Maine, Orono how to use visuals in consultations. Penn State's lively crew taught us to videotape our sessions for a range of training purposes and provided the means of tracking peer tutors after graduation. At his Writing Place in University of North Carolina/Wilmington Tom MacLennan pioneered the use of volunteer community consultants, then shared his tactics with us all. At the Penn State National Peer Tutoring Conference Ken Bruffee proposed that peer consultants transform the university through their radical Writing Center pedagogy, then underscored his belief by attending sessions run by students. Harvey Kail reiterated Bruffee's message for demoralized Directors at our tenth anniversary conference in Grand Valley, Michigan last November. Over the years at Colorado College Molly Wingate has shown us how to keep the joy in the face of budget cuts, and at session after session we've exchanged ideas for going on-line or building social responsibility, drawing funding from other disciplines or turning to athletics

for help. Recent conferences have helped us see Writing Centers as focal points to teach social responsibility. In short, the collaboration we've modelled in these sessions has built our Centers back home. In reacting, responding, gathering materials, and reporting back, our peer consultants have taken these opportunities to insist upon remaking our work each year. By this means, then, we have splashed new lights across our own puddles, enlarging and connecting them.

Yet those puddles of our own making are powerful. Exploring dark spaces of curiosity and confusion, we slowly create some glimmering puddles of light. What we learn--through reasoning, reading, collaboration, experimentation--we pass on in conference presentations. This too is empowering, explained Julian: "Speaking as a writing consultant at professional conferences allows me to realize that I really have learned something. I doubted how my part of our session would go, but was pleased to find that my knowledge of the Writing Center and consulting was sufficient to carry my part."

After that year I had to beg Beth to go to a Writing Center Conference, it somehow became a matter of prestige. Like working in the Center, speaking at a Conference became a cherished part of our training, and no one felt complete without it. (I even remember a disorganized conference when we got word our session was downgraded to a twenty-minute segment just a day or two before it took place. Though one speaker was angry, William, a former ballet dancer, simply smiled and said he was always told,

"You never refuse to dance because the stage is small." And he told the shortened story of his personal odyssey from cynic to humanist in the Writing Center with charm and good humor.) So we've developed the range of opportunities you can see on your handout of this year's professional work, as well as service learning options. Reflecting on all this activity, I see the spreading puddles of reflected light as our Center has grown in complexity and understanding. I recall Matt and Christina at Purdue, for example, the first year we made our presentation into a conversation. After I presented a lot of evidence about how much peer consultants really know, Matt spoke of "consultant's block," while Christina explored the "writer's block" first-year consultants often undergo. This seemed fine until the audience called upon our three new consultants with barely a month's experience to comment on their reactions. To my amazement, each reported the first flutterings of one phenomenon or the other, cited conversations with senior consultants which had helped them, and explained how my training sessions prepared them to cope. (I didn't know they had.) I later received 5 requests for copies of our videotape of the session, along with several calls for more information on the "Garrison method." (That was a questioning technique developed by Rollins peer consultant Dan Garrison, but the consultants spoken of it with such authority that listeners assumed it had come from an article.)

After that I was shamed into my own collaborations, working to build conversations with consultants rather then writing a

paper of my own, so that I haven't written a paper like this one for a Writing Center conference in five years. It feels wrong, somehow, to be alone at the keyboard, though I admit to doing all my other writing that way. But not for the Writing Center!

For the Penn State National Peer Tutoring Conference in 1990 I worked with Steve, the most right-brained consultant I've ever hired, the two of us crafting a presentation on collaboration in the Writing Center. Our partners explained the process of carrying collaborative community-building across the campus and thereby infecting the world! I taught Steve to function in a left-brained world, and he taught me to acknowledge my right brain. And we laughed more over that work than I can remember from the past. I think I laugh more easily now. It was to our advantage that Ken Bruffee heard our presentation, sat down with me afterwards, and showed me the passage to connecting what we did then to the service learning we've added since. Again I found myself distributing copies of our videotape, even as the peer consultants were providing real help to colleagues elsewhere seeking to redefine collaboration on campuses loath to accept it. An expanded comprehension of the tutor's role in collaboration evolved from our study of Myers Briggs personality types and writing style, leading to consultation strategies Rollins peer writing consultants modelled at the National Peer Tutoring Conference in Vermont. Then last year I found myself in the bizarre position of acquiescing to the peer consultants' insistence that we promote the concept of Writing Centers and change,

that I even celebrate change through an interactive conversation with them in which I admitted my own abiding fears of change but agreed that it was good.

And yes, this was good for me as Director, enabling me this year to produce with the consultants controversial sessions to challenge the cozy success of Writing Centers like our own in creating collaborative communities. Insisting that we blow the walls down and build a sense of social consciousness, we've taken what has empowered us to a wider world through service learning projects and community volunteers who question our comfortable definitions of the work world.

And so we're splashing light around as far and furiously as we can in our own sessions. It has an empowering effect. Wrote Adriana: "Preparing for a formal speaking engagement makes me focus on what we do--consciously examine it--determine what works and why it works and how to keep it going. In terms of shaping the Writing Center, I think presentations give us credibility--a kind of authority that boosts our self confidence and increases our good reputation on campus. Sharing at conferences also gives me the chance to learn from others at the conference--things I can bring back home." With experience comes confidence as well.

In summary, lets weave these reflections together a bit. Perhaps Tom captured the real consequences of our interaction with collegial organizations when he wrote, "As explorer and guide our professional skills serve us best. We stand on the inside, holding out a hand to those who want to explore with us."

For our consultants, our Writing Centers, and thus our students and faculty, participation in the profession has given insight, understanding, inspiration, material, an authority built up from shared shards of light. The information we exchange is woven into the fabric of our Centers, the policies we define, the training we instigate.

Yet a centerpiece of this collaborative exchange has been the inclusion of peer writing consultants, who present their strategies and debate their Centers' policies at regional and national conferences, bringing back new ideas which they insist upon implementing. For me the Writing Center conference has been integral to the training and professional growth of undergraduate peer writing consultants. This inclusiveness has prevented the stagnation we often find in academe.

Participating in professional conferences, though, has done more than shape and shed light upon our Writing Centers. Our consultants have become professionals, convincing others of their possibilities. Consider Todd's conclusions:

> Speaking with the voice of a writing consultant legitimizes and solidifies my "stature" as showing up for staff meetings and doing the work of consulting cannot. Beyond that, it makes my Writing Center consultant experience more real; it truly comes to life as I share what I do in words uttered from the mouth, in the connection of my eyes reaching into the eyes of those with whom I find myself seeking a link of understanding. As I speak, I act; as I act, I become, can only genuinely become, the role through which I speak.

Splashing light from the puddles, then, is transforming. But I want to make clear here that I too have been transformed.

Now I cannot talk about the Writing Center--or the profession--save as I talk about the students (my fellow researchers, collaborators, friends). We all owned the experience, the learning--and the transformation. How can I say this? After a session in Charleston when both student speakers responded to a question regarding plans for graduate school, someone asked me, "How can you bear to let them go?" I wrote a journal entry on that question, the annual pain in the joy we all feel at watching our peer consultants succeed and go on. . .surely, like Beth here, to outshine us! (And I laughingly remember a participant who praised a talk of Julie-Ann's with the odd comment, "How did you dare to bring them? I'd never take mine out in public!") And then there was the JOY of last year's Florida College English Association meeting in Gainesville, when the entire Writing Center staff was invited to speak in five sessions. Reflecting later on their presence, Conference Chair Patrick McMahan, observed that the students were "lively, human, creative. We professionals," he remarked, "had acquired a patina of artificiality over the years. Your students speaking were like actual people."

It was true. I was proud to be among them. The effect of students and faculty interacting. . .as equals, as collaborators . . .at conferences has been transforming. But the fundamental change is in me; therein the light now shines. (But can I say this to a roomful of strangers?)

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